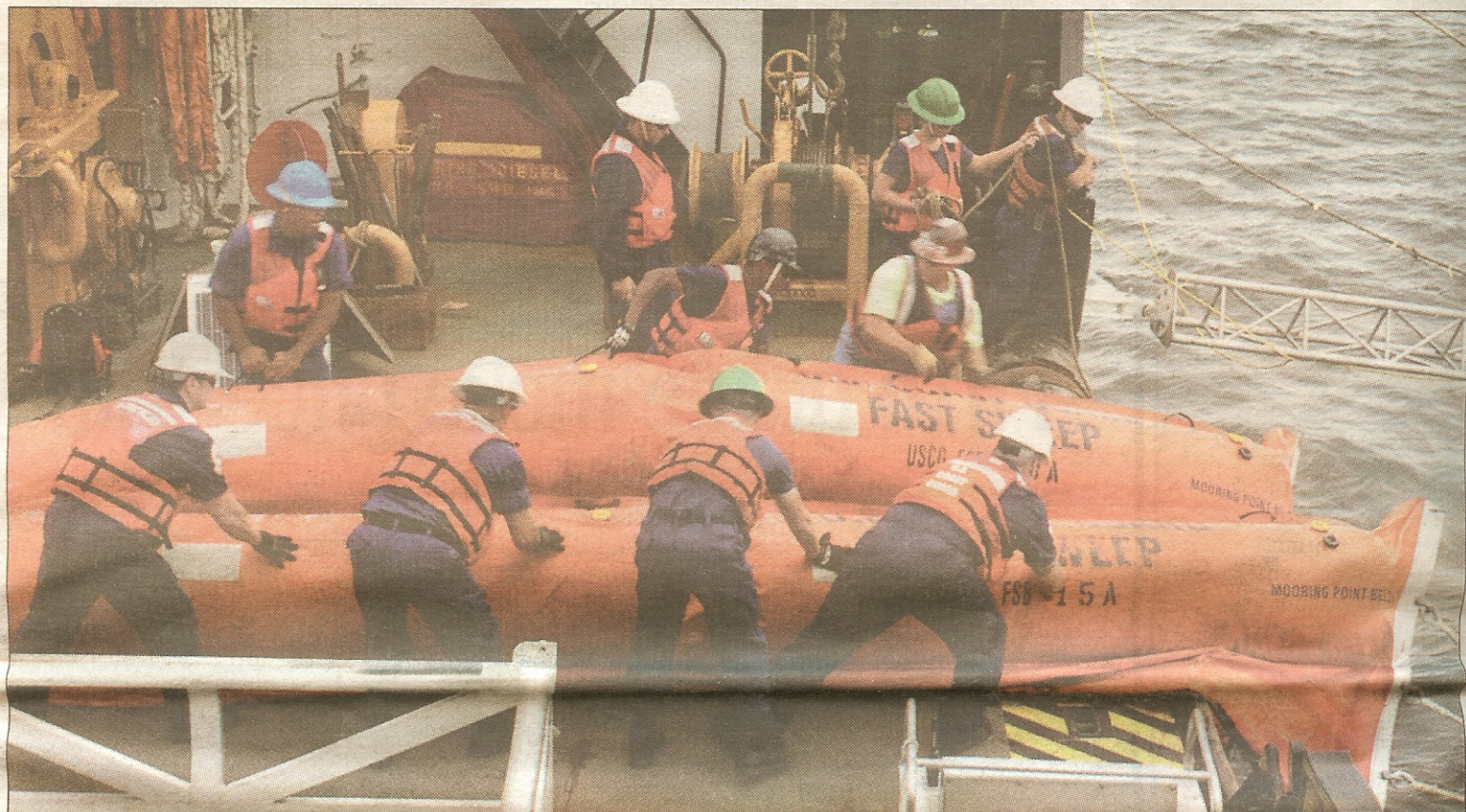


Guarding against catastrophe



The crewmembers aboard the Coast Guard Cutter Juniper slide an inflatable fast sweep containment boom into Narragansett Bay. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Lauren Downs.

U.S. Coast Guard practices its oil spill recovery exercise in Narragansett Bay

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While they have yet been pressed into service to manage an oil spill operation, the men and women aboard the *U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Juniper* practice annually to make sure that such an accident would be handled properly.

Typically, the cutter handles missions including search and rescue, law enforcement, ice breaking and the near-weekly exercise of buoy tending. The

Spilled Oil Recovery System (SORS) exercise on Wednesday, Aug. 22, was nothing like the crew's normal routine, according to Lieutenant Commander and *Juniper* Commanding Officer Richard J. Wester.

"We've never had to actually do this [oil recovery] outside of practice and we hope it stays that way," he said of the exercise that took place in Narragansett Bay between Newport and Jamestown.

The last two major oil spills in

the area that needed immediate attention were the *World Prodigy* oil spill in 1989 in Narragansett Bay and the *North Cape* oil spill in 1996 in Block Island Sound. Coast Guard Public Affairs Specialist Lauren Downs said that the Coast Guard oversaw the response and clean-up efforts of the *North Cape* incident.

John Joe Dec, who has been training crews for over a decade after spending 25 years in the Coast Guard, explained that the Coast Guard only recovers oil

when absolutely necessary. "We usually don't interfere when the industry comes in because they need the work," he said.

Most of the ship's typical Coast Guard missions are done on a routine basis and little advanced training is required for those tasks, Wester said.

"We've never actually done oil skimming so it's vital that every year we train everyone ... and it's not just that we have the right



PHOTO BY PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS LAUREN DOWNS.

John Joe Dec, incident management branch equipment specialist at the First Coast Guard District, teaches crewmembers aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Juniper* how an oil-skimming pump operates during oil-spill training.

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equipment but that our crew is [ready]," he added.

Wester explained that everything changed after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989, which dumped 11 million gallons of crude oil into the waters off the coast of Alaska. The U.S. Congress then passed the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 to mandate all cutters like the *Juniper* be properly equipped to skim and recover oil.

The exercise took place under cloudy skies and in breezy 60 degree temperatures. The crew worked within the four main functions of SORS to execute the mission: Concentrate, skim, pump and contain.

Concentrating the oil is related to timing, which is everything when it comes to skimming oil from the ocean's surface. The spill can spread quickly and if it reaches a rainbow sheen, it's too late. At that point, the oil is 200 times thinner than human hair.

The *Juniper* crew laid out and inflated a gigantic orange "fast

catch sweep," also called a containment boom, which looks like a U-shaped raft with a net on the bottom. Dec barked orders while the men and women aboard the cutter worked to move the mission along.

"Are we all ready to put this in the water?" Dec asked. After placing it into the water, the crew used hooks and rope to spread the sweep open for proper skimming.

Next, the DESMI Terminator Skimmer was placed in the water with a long hose attached. This device pumped water from one side of the boat to the other. Normally, the oil and water mixture would go into a temporary storage container, called a "sea slug." After pumping water for a few minutes, the crew pulled everything back onto the boat to finish the exercise.

When the five-hour mission was over, Wester was pleased with the result. "It went very well," he said.

Dec shared those sentiments. "It was a long and hard three days and the crew did great," he said,

referring to the time needed to test the equipment and finish training.

The crew, which was a mix of veterans and first-timers, also received help from the Coast Guard First District from Boston and two members of the Atlantic Strike Team from Fort Dix, New Jersey.

The representatives from Boston helped on the technical side, Wester said. The Atlantic Strike Team was right in there during the exercise, which is just one of the team's specialties.

"They are a rapid response team for oil and chemical spills and it was so great having them on board, too," Wester said. He added that the team responded to the anthrax incidents in Washington, D.C., following 9/11. They also tested the air at Ground Zero to make sure it was safe for workers.

Wester said that countries will ask for the team specifically to help with cleaning up oil or chemical spills. "They have a lot of experience and are very well respected," he added.